DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 200 TM 035 045

AUTHOR	Fenton, Ray; Stofflet, Fred; Straugh, Tom
TITLE	The Rise and Fall of a Standards Based Spelling Assessment: Did Spelling Improve or Is it Just Another Case of Teaching to the Test?
PUB DATE	2003-04-21
NOTE	9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Secondary Education; *Program Implementation; *School Districts; *Spelling; Spelling Instruction; *State Standards; *Test Construction
IDENTIFIERS	*Alaska

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the creation, implementation, and discontinuation of a standards based spelling assessment program in Anchorage, Alaska. The program was initiated by the Anchorage school board as part of establishing district-wide performance goals for students in 1998-1999. Spelling was singled out for attention because of national discussions about spelling standards. After some discussion, the school board mandate was translated into the development of grade level lists of words that all students were expected to know and a set of related spelling tests. Test forms were developed that generally had split-half test reliabilities of 0.6 to 0.8, with fairly stable correlations with the district's standardized tests. The state of Alaska began to move toward a high stakes standards-based system, and arguments for the integration of spelling tests and writing tests were given new force by the impending implementation of the state tests. The Anchorage school board then made the high frequency word lists and the Anchorage spelling tests optional, and spelling goals were set aside in favor of goals that were more specific to increased performances on the Alaska state assessments. The Anchorage system was successful, but it was overcome by events. This paper shows that a standards-based system with assessment built in can improve student spelling performance over a short period of time. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 478 200

The Rise and Fall of a Standards Based Spelling Assessment
Did spelling improve or is it just another case of teaching to the test?

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
R. Fenton
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
1

A paper prepared for presentation at the American Educational Research Association Convention in Chicago, IL

April 21, 2003

Ray Fenton
FentonResearch

Fred Stofflet
Leona Group

Tom Straugh
Alaska Pacific University

Ray Fenton, Fenton Research, 8520 N. Coral Ridge Loop, Tucson, AZ 85704
FentonResearch@aol.com

TM035045

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Rise and Fall of a Standards Based Spelling Assessment
Did spelling improve or is it just another case of teaching to the test?

On March 31, 2003 the United States was at war. American forces captured a major bridge across the Euphrates killing 15 Iraqi soldiers. The U.S. Army forced their way to within fifty miles of Baghdad.

However, the war was not the top story on Maui. The "above the fold" front page story for the Maui News was "Maui student is state's top speller." Nathaniel Salazar, a grade 8 student from Maui Waena Intermediate spelled "proscenium" to win the Hawaii State Spelling Bee. Spelling is important.[1]

This paper reports the creation, implementation, and discontinuation of a standards based spelling assessment program in Anchorage Alaska. The program was initiated by the Anchorage School Board as part of establishing district-wide performance goals for students in 1998-1999. Spelling was singled out for specific attention because of national discussions about spelling standards (Traynelis-Yurek and Strong, 1999) and dissatisfaction related to local spelling performance.

Anchorage has a long and active program of student assessment using both norm referenced and standards based tests. Spelling was the one area where student achievement often fell below the 50th percentile, the national average. The Anchorage School District Profile of Performance include tables that show a continued pattern of lower performance in spelling than in other tested areas (1997, 1998, 1999). When compared with other language arts areas there was a clear spelling "gap." Weak spelling performance repeatedly made news in Anchorage and the School Board demanded investigation.

While norm referenced test scores in Anchorage averaged around the 60th percentile. Relatively lower performance in spelling was a consistent feature of public reports of school district performance. . Tables presented in the Profile of Performance showed an ongoing "gap." In 1998, there was as much as a 20 percentile point difference between reading and spelling. Average spelling scores fell below the national average at two grades. The school board demanded action.

School administrators and language arts specialists provided testimony to the Anchorage board that norm referenced tests are inadequate measures of spelling as it was taught. The norm referenced tests used to assess spelling, the California Achievement Test – 5, was widely criticized by teachers as showing what students did not know rather than what they had accomplished.

Teachers claimed that the tests were too short, did not measure spelling performance in the same way that it is measured with classroom, emphasized difficult words and failed to reflect the spelling skill that Anchorage students were able to demonstrate when writing.

---

[1] Richard Hodges does a good job of providing a brief historical overview of spelling in US schools (Hodges, 1991).

Some teachers spoke in favor of trait-based writing assessment as better measure for assessment of the spelling program. Some teachers spoke in favor of direct instruction in spelling with success measured on weekly word list tests as the best indicator of instructional success.

There was an active discussion of the Anchorage spelling curriculum, instructional materials and student performance. In general, the discussion reflected the disconnect between spelling instruction and actual student spelling performance that has been a feature of spelling teaching and assessment (Gill and Scharer, 1996; Bartch, 1992, Teale, 1992). Teachers started to review the International Reading Association discussions of the 1990s on the values of whole-language and direct instruction "philosophies."

Some teachers and parents advocated for the teaching spelling based on phonetics and on sets of reliable phonetics generalizations (Abbott, 2000). The fifty year old instructional debate over the best way to teach spelling again came to the surface (Clymer, 1963). The school district curriculum staff advocated for an integrated language arts approach with an emphasis on teaching spelling as part writing as well as regular direct instruction. Teachers reported that they continued to make use of a variety of approaches to teaching spelling (Heald-Taylor, 1998).[2]

The Anchorage school board made plain their dissatisfaction with spelling test scores and called for the development of a standards based spelling program that would include direct instruction and an organized system of assessment that would provide an indicator of spelling success. After some discussion the school board mandate was translated into the development of grade level lists of words that all students were expected to know and a set of related spelling tests.

.Groups of teachers developed 100 word lists of "high frequency words" that all students are expected to know upon completion of grades 2 through 10. Lists were generated from a variety of sources and some teachers contributed published grade level lists of words that they had been using in their teaching for years.

Lists went through a review process but there were often disagreements among teachers about the inclusion of individual words as being "too easy" or "too hard" for the grade in question. Initial lists were reviewed by groups of teachers familiar with a specific grade

---

[2] Elementary teachers commonly used practices such as teaching specific words as part of reading assignments, developing theme units with associated word lists, direct instruction in special words or a "word of the day," inclusion of mini-lessons as part of writing instruction, individual student conferences to review writing, use of grade level word lists with weekly spelling tests, student learning logs, shared proofreading and editing groups, inventive spelling, and some specific techniques derived from Slingerland language arts instruction. Secondary teachers tended to use fewer strategies, do less direct instruction in spelling, and place a greater reliance on the writing process as the key to spelling instruction. The diversity of approaches to teaching spelling in Anchorage was similar to those found by Heald-Taylor in a national study.

levels. Some minor modifications were made to these lists based on a large scale review by classroom teachers and curriculum specialists[3].

Anchorage School District test developers worked with the Anchorage School District Executive Director for Curriculum and Evaluation and the Anchorage Language Arts to develop multiple forms of 20 item spelling tests for grades three through eleven. An attempt was made to match the difficulty level of the various test forms.

Details on the reliability of various test forms for each grade level are included in the Profile of Performance for 2000. (Anchorage School District, 2001). In general the individual test forms have split-half reliabilities that range from .6 to .8. Correlations with the CAT-5 were fairly stable across administrations and range from .7 to .8.

However, the performances on individual words and groups of grade level tests were quite different. In the Spring 2000 administration the percent correct for individual words ranged from less than 10%, "laid" at second grade, to 100%, "phone" and "wanted" at 10th grade. Secondary students generally did much better on the words identified as "high frequency words."

A balanced matrix sampling model was adopted for spring and fall testing. All students were tested as class groups. Test forms were assigned so that a student tested in the fall with one form had an equal chance of being tested with each of the four other forms of the grade level test in fall. A goal or target was established for 70% success on the grade level word lists by the end of the year.

Actual performances on individual test forms ranged from 68% to 82% during item trials. Minor changes in the test forms were made prior to actual administration for assessment purposes. The fall administration scores ranged from 49% to 83% for individual grades. Spring administration scores ranged from 67% to 85%. In general, fall averages were lower in elementary grades and fall to spring gains were larger. Overall, gains in grade level performance were significant for all grades.

Student performance on the CAT-5 spelling tests improved only slightly but all grades moved up to the 50th Percentile by 2001. The "gap" between spelling scores and overall student performance closed slightly and the gains were significant due to the large numbers of students, 2,000 or more, tested at each grade.

The State of Alaska started to move toward implementation of a "high stakes" standards based testing system. A grade 10 high school graduation test was implemented that

---

[3] The Anchorage Spelling Tests – 100 High Frequency Words Grades 2 – 10 is available as a supplement to this paper from the Anchorage School District Assessment and Evaluation Department, 4600 Debarr Ave, Anchorage, AK 99514 or Ray Fenton, FentonResearch, 8520 N. Coral Ridge Loop, Tucson, AZ 85704. The document includes word lists, copies of spelling tests with five test forms for each grade, and results from a pilot testing in Spring 2000 and Spring and Fall performance results for 2001-2002.

students have to pass to receive a diploma. Spelling was not made a part of the state high stakes testing program though it is considered among the "conventions" of good writing that are considered in the scoring of writing samples.

When setting school district goals for 2001-2002 came up for school board discussion, spelling again became an item for discussion. Arguments made by teachers for the integration of spelling assessment with writing were given new force by the impending implementation of the State of Alaska tests. Individual teachers approached school board members and indicated that the use of word lists and pre- and post-testing led to "teaching to the test" and diverted attention from teaching spelling in the context of writing.

The school board accepted a recommendation from the Curriculum and Assessment department that spelling be assessed in the context of writing. The use of the high frequency word lists and the Anchorage Spelling Tests became optional for teachers and schools. Most schools discontinued their use. Writing assessment was discontinued in 2002 – 2003. Spelling goals were set aside for 2002-2003 in favor of goals that were more specific to increased performances on Alaska State Assessments.

Conclusions

Spelling is important. As Morris and Templeton (1999) noted:

> Spelling is so visible, so obvious that it often assumes the role of a proxy for literacy and in that role is bound to generate controversy. Spelling has also been the flashpoint in the debate between more integrated, whole-language-oriented instruction and more structured part-to-whole instruction. And inevitably, these concerns are tied to political agendas (p. 102).

In the Anchorage educational environment, evidence that students were only average in spelling was enough to generate publicity and provoke action on the part of the school board. The discussion was a "flashpoint" that brought forward the concerns of those who prefer more structured instruction over those who prefer a more integrated approach.

The response to the "problem" was to develop a standards based system. Teachers were able, with some notable disagreements, to select the words that they felt were the most important for students to be able to spell at each grade level. The word lists were "high frequency" words keyed to what students were expected to be able to read and write about.

A feedback system based on student success was constructed through the creation of more or less balanced tests that allowed assessing student growth in spelling. Common statistical tests showed that the teacher produced word lists and teacher selected groups of words for tests produced a reasonable level of reliability. The tests also showed a

reasonable relationship to the very different "rules based" spelling tests included in the CAT-5.

Teachers did react to the word lists by "teaching to the test." Selected words were emphasized within the existing modes of instruction. Some teachers changed their emphasis to put more weight on direct instruction of the words on the ASD lists. Some schools made mastery of the spelling lists a school wide goal. Student performance improved.

Developing expectations, making them public, modifying instruction, and improved performance are the characteristics of a successful standards based system that includes an effective feedback loop.

The Anchorage system was successful but it was overcome by events. High stakes state tests that had to be passed to receive a high school diploma pushed spelling performance *per se* off the front page. The goal in Anchorage shifted from doing well on a spelling test to doing well on a writing test that included spelling within one of the areas of "conventions" used to produce a single writing performance level.

Almost all educators will at some level agree with the statement, "Spelling is important." However, there is little agreement on how spelling should be taught and how much emphasis should be placed on spelling. Some see it as a terminal goal where correct spelling is to be valued as an indicator of literacy. Some see it as an intermediate goal where spelling is only one element in successful communication.

If there it any national consensus, it is represented in the inclusion of spelling as an important but not a primary element in the Standards for English Language Arts (National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, 1966). Standard 6 of the national standards suggests that spelling is one element where students need a "working knowledge related to the creation of texts.

> Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g. spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts (p. 36)."

How much emphasis should be placed on spelling?

Whatever the answer to the above question, this paper provides an example that a standards based system with built in assessment of student performance can improve spelling performance over a short period of time. In the case of spelling as in any area, assessment can be a useful tool in instructional improvement.

To quote Nathaniel Salazar in a statement to the press shortly after his Hawaii State Spelling Bee championship about his feelings when he was given the word 'proscenium,' "Inside I knew how to spell it but I didn't want to jump up and down" (Maui News,

2003). Maybe we just need to continue to have spelling assessments so that students like Michael can get recognition for learning how to spell the hard words.

References

Abbott, M. (2000). Identifying Reliable Generalizations for Spelling Words: The Importance of Multilevel Analysis. The Elementary School Journal, 2000, 101 (2). Pp. 233-245).

Anchorage School District (1999, 2000, and 2001). Profile of Performance. Anchorage School District Assessment and Evaluation Department. P.O. Box 196614, 4600 DeBarr Rd. Anchorage, Alaska 99514.

Anchorage School District (2001). The Anchorage Spelling Tests – 100 High-Frequency Words Grades 2 – 10. Curriculum and Evaluation Department, P.O. box 196614, 4600 DeBarr Rd., Anchorage, AK 99514.

Bartch, J. (1992). An alternative approach to spelling: An integrated approach. Language Arts, 1992, 69, 404-408.

Clymer, T (1963). The utility of phonics generalizations in the primary grades. Reading Teacher, 16, Pp 182-187.

Gill, C. and P. Scharer (1996). Why do they get it on Friday and misspell it on Monday? Teachers inquiring about their students as spellers. Language Arts, 73, Pp. 89-96.

Head-Taylor (1998). Three paradigms of spelling instruction in grades 3 to 6. The Reading Teacher, 1998, 51 (5), Pp. 404-413.

Hodges, R. (1991). The conventions of writing. In James Flood, Julie Jensen, Diane Lapp and James R. Squire, Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts. New York: Macmillan, 1991.

National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association (1996). Standards for the English Language Arts. National council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon road, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

Teale, W. (1992). Editorial. Language Arts, 1992, 69. Pp. i

Templeton, S. and Darrell Morris (1999). Questions teachers ask about spelling. Reading Research Quarterly 1999, 34 (1). Pp. 102-112.

Traynelis-Yurek, E. and Mary Strong (1999). Spelling practices in school districts and regions across the United States and state standards. Reading Horizons, 1999, 39 (4). Pp 279- 292..

Paper presented at AERA Convention in Chicago, April 2003

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

TM035045

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: The Rise and Fall of A STANDARDS Based Spelling Assessment Did Spelling Improve Or Is IT Just Another Case of Teaching To The Test.

Author(s): Ray Fenton, Fred Stoffler, Tom Straugh

Corporate Source: Fenton Research

Publication Date: April 21, 2003

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Level 1

[X]

Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) and paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

Level 2A

[ ]

Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2B

Level 2B

[ ]

Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits.
If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Sign here, → please

Signature: Ray Fenton	Printed Name/Position/Title: Ray Fenton
Organization/Address: Fenton Research 8520 N Coral Ridge Loop Tucson, AZ 85704	Telephone: 907-830-3875 FAX: 520-229-8687
	E-Mail Address: FentonResearch@aol.com Date: 5-5-03

(Over)

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, *or*, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:
Address:
Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:
Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse: **University of Maryland**
ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation
1129 Shriver Lab, Bldg 075
College Park, MD 20742
Attn: Acquisitions

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

University of Maryland
ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation
1129 Shriver Lab, Bldg 075
College Park, MD 20742
Attn: Acquisitions